

## Cultural Student Organizations 1

Running Head: Cultural Student Organizations and African American Men

Cultural Student Organizations and their impact on Degree Attainment for African American Men  
at Flagship Institutions

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## **Introduction**

The topic of African American men and college is an issue that has gained attention over a number of years. Unfortunately, the attention is generally negative as the lowest numbers of college enrollment and attainment are often attributed to them. According to Bowen's (2009) research on race/ethnicity at flagships:

Additionally, black and Hispanic males take the most time to graduate and are the only sub-groups in which more students graduate in five or six years than in four. Perhaps the single most noteworthy statistic is that only 26 percent of black males attending these leading public universities graduate within four years. (p. 46)

Flagships are often known for their selectivity, high academic standards, and abundance of opportunities and resources for students. Bowen et. al., (2009) describes the unique nature of flagship institutions:

The special characteristics of the flagship universities that we study in such detail set them off in many ways from higher education in the United States viewed more broadly; they are much more selective, they enroll more students from privileged backgrounds, and they have resources far beyond what many other colleges and universities, public and private, can claim. (p. 20)

This description can explain the importance of a flagship school in the life of an African American student. These institutions have much to offer and can help a student gain access to opportunities they wouldn't normally be able to. This is especially significant for students of color who often don't have the social capital necessary in order to advance as students and future professionals. Perna & Titus (2005) define social capital in their work on parental involvement and college enrollment:

In his comprehensive assessment of the origins and uses of social capital, Portes (1998) noted that social capital is acquired through an individual's relationships with other individuals, particularly through membership in social networks and other social structures. (p. 488)

Social capital can prove to be very important in the lives of students, especially those of color. This form of capital can help them to become more acclimated to their institutions and learn how to navigate campus.

With the range in time it takes African American men to complete their degree, there are a number of factors to consider. The socioeconomic status of the student and the educational background of the student's parents can be predictors of a student's probability of graduating. Bowen (2009) states that "black men who have not completed their degree requirements after four years are more likely than white men to leave school because of either inadequate financial resources or discouragement" (p. 51).

As these students gain their degree, they are doing it in a place that often doesn't provide the necessary resources and support in order for them to be successful. Flagship institutions are often predominately white institutions (PWI's) that foster an environment that may not always be the most comfortable for African American males. The environment can often be plagued with issues of privilege, race, and the student lacking in social/cultural capital. Fries-Britt & Turner's (2002) research on successful students at Traditionally White Institutions (TWI's) and HBCU's states that:

Conversely, Black students at TWI's are more likely to experience a disconnection between their high aspirations and their ability to be academically integrated into their institution. Research suggests that Black students at TWI's have significantly lower

levels of academic integration, are less satisfied with their university, and suffer more from such interference as discrimination and inadequate study habits than White students (p. 317).

Research at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's) shows us that providing students with a network of support that includes staff and faculty can be helpful. Providing experiences that focus on their particular culture and having peers similar to them can increase the chances of students having a positive experience. Bowen (2009) also suggests that "improving the first-year experiences of students from low-income families and those of black and Hispanic men may have the potential to narrow modestly-although not eliminate-disparities in graduation rates between these groups and more advantaged students" (p.56).

College preparation programs are another factor involved in degree attainment. Small and Winship (2007) suggest that "students with the adequate pre-college preparation are likely to persevere and graduate, even if they do so while experiencing greater duress, or with lower GPAs, or choosing different career paths than comparable white students" (p. 1271).

Harper (2006) believes that campus administrators should be involved in the process of improving graduation rates of black males:

A team of institutional stakeholders including, but not limited to, faculty, student affairs professionals, and black male student leaders, should be formed to develop campus-specific initiatives to improve black male retention and graduation rates. Similar to the aforementioned admissions team, these stakeholders should work collaboratively to construct a strategic plan for investigating, illuminating, and reversing problematic trends and inequitable outcomes (p.12).

I believe that campus resources such as student organizations, mentoring programs, faculty/staff involvement, and advising can help African American males attain their degree. My study will focus on purposeful campus resources and programs as a way to help these men graduate.

### **University of Illinois impact**

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) is the flagship institution for the state of Illinois. It is also a PWI, with a total undergraduate population of 29,653 (Division of Management Information). Out of the 29,653 undergraduates, 1,904 of them are African Americans, compared with 18,330 Caucasian students (Division of Management Information). Clearly, there are a small number of African American students on campus. Bowen's (2009) statistics show us that it takes these students a much longer period of time to complete their degree at flagships.

With such a small number of African American undergraduate students and the issue of degree attainment at flagships, it's important to examine the relationship between them on campus. It will be important to study this topic as a way to help African American men utilize campus resources and attain their degree. It will also help to gain the perspective of black men on campus and how they are able to (or not) adjust to campus and college academics. It would help undergraduate advisors, faculty, and other administrators to understand the plight of students of color on this campus.

With programs like Inclusive Illinois, Illinois Promise, and the Bridge Transition Program, UIUC is trying to increase access to disadvantaged students and increase awareness of issues around race to students. Furthermore, the topic of diversity has been prominent among colleges

and universities. The university would be able to audit its current practices and update them to fit the needs of this particular student demographic.

### **Proposed Research**

My research will focus on addressing the role of cultural student organizations and their impact on degree attainment for American men at UIUC. I would also like to examine the resources provided by the university that has allowed them to remain as students and get closer to receiving their degree. I would like to highlight the capital that exists on campus and to see if they are making a difference in the lives of these students.

Several resources exist on campus to serve students of color. These include the Office of Minority Student Affairs (OMSA), CORE (Creating Opportunities Recognizing Excellence), 100 Strong, Men of Impact, CBSU (Central Black Student Union), and the Bruce D. Nesbitt Cultural Center (known to students as “The Black house”). In my experience on campus, female students seem to be the most involved in these organizations. Part of my questioning will center on if these opportunities are actually being used by African American men. If they aren’t being used, are they using anything else? Do they have any other sources of support if they don’t use campus resources? What else could be implemented that might better serve the African American men on campus?

I would also like to look at existing research to see what other campuses and/or administrators are doing to support and increase attainment for African American men. I will use current theories, practices (at PWI’s and HBCU’s) to explore this topic. Collectively, this work will help to shed light on the current situation at UIUC and how to increase degree attainment for these students.

I will be using a convenience sampling method in order to obtain my participants. As a current employee of University Housing, I am aware of a few groups that would include the population I'm interested in. One particular housing group, Men of Impact, is a central housing group (a group for any student on campus) for African American men that helps to address the needs, concerns, and issues facing them. They convene each week to discuss different matters, plan events for the campus, and opportunities for development as an executive board. I plan to attend one of their scheduled meetings, introduce my research, and ask if anyone would be interested in being interviewed. I would meet with 2-3 students for an hour and ask them specific questions (See appendix A) about their experiences as African American men working towards a bachelor's degree at UIUC. I would ask a number of questions with the students I interview in order to have a better understanding of their experience. The students interviewed will be given aliases to protect their identity.

### Reflexivity

I became interested in this topic after reading the information from Bowen (2009) regarding the number of African American men who don't graduate from PWI's. Unfortunately, the information presented by Bowen wasn't alarming, as I know from personal experience the issues that can keep African American men from being successful in college. However, I wanted to know the factors behind why they were less likely to attain their degree in comparison with their peers.

As an African American woman studying higher education, I have a desire to learn about my culture and African Americans experiences in college. Being a current student at a PWI, I couldn't help but wonder about the African American men on campus. Throughout my time as a resident director on campus, I have interacted with many of these students in an advisory role. I

knew there were several options on campus for these students, but I wanted to know if they really made a difference. Were they just social organizations or organizations of support and encouragement?

In my experience, there seemed to be a very small group of African American men who were participating members of these organizations. In my perspective, African American women seem to be the norm for leadership roles and active members of cultural student organizations. This led me to an even greater desire to research African American men and their role in these organizations and on campus. I wanted to know if Bowen's research was true for the University of Illinois and if so, why?

### Literature Review

The research about degree attainment at PWI's for African American males shows why it's important to look at their predicament. Cuyjet (1997) provides information on the environments and conditions in which these students exist in prior to college. These arrangements greatly affect their ability to persist in their studies and gain their degree. They also face a myriad of problems once they arrive on campus according to Harper (2006). Faced with a hostile environment and a lack of knowledge regarding collegiate life, African American males can often find themselves unable to finish their degree. Credle (1991) provides valuable information on plans that include mentoring programs and cultural organizations. Along with recommendations on institution change, student involvement theories by Astin and Tinto provide support for cultural student organizations have shown to have an effect on degree attainment for African American men. Research on these organizations showcases this effect and the number of organizations that exist to help these students.



*Profile of African American men*

According to Aragon (2007) “students of color account for almost one quarter (24.8%) of postsecondary education enrollment, with African Americans representing approximately 12%.” For the African American men who do enroll, the rates are still lowest for them and they generally take longer to complete their degrees than women. Cuyjet (1997) highlights the gender imbalance between African American men and women:

In a particularly glaring example, among those receiving professional degrees, African American men are the only ethnic group in which men do not outnumber women. This statistic is not an anomaly; in a similar example among the nation’s freshman class of 1995 black men have lower numbers compared to their female counterparts than Native Americans, Asians, Hispanics, or whites (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1997). (p. 6)

Cuyjet (1997) believes the reason for low rates among African Americans is due to barriers that include a “high rate of incarceration, disproportionate high school dropout rates, a high rate of homicide, and serious health problems” (p. 6). Cuyjet also believes that for the students who do attend college are unprepared for the experience due to a number of issues:

This stems from a number of conditions: attending academically poorer elementary and secondary schools, lowered expectations of peers and significant adults toward academic achievement, peer pressure to disdain educational accomplishments and education as an outcome, financial hardships limiting educational access, lack of appropriate role models, and other barriers owing to racism. (pp. 6-7)

It’s no surprise that these men struggle on campus as they are entering these institutions with the odds against them. Due to the insufficient preparation for college, they are often not ready for all that comes with the experience of being a college student. Research from Aragon (2007)

shows that these students need help with fundamental college concepts in order to persist in college:

Many diverse students require various forms of cultural capital that extend beyond academic content knowledge (e.g., science content knowledge), including basic concepts such as: effective study skills; how to balance their social and academic lives; how to communicate effectively in classes, with their professors, and with their White, middle-class peers; how to compute grade point average (GPA) and correspondingly, to determine their academic standing; how to find the courses they need and to register for them; and where to find and how to use campus resources. (p. 105)

Unfortunately, many of these students have a disadvantaged background coming into higher education that subsequently causes them to not have the necessary knowledge to be successful in college.

Harper (2006) states that “nationally, more than two-thirds (67.6 percent) of black men who start college do not graduate within six years, which is the lowest college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ ethnic groups in higher education” (p. vii). As stated earlier, Bowen (2009) believes that financial hardship or discouragement may be the cause for black men not graduating. The other problem may be the institutional environment that exists.

#### *Student issues on campus*

As these students enter into higher education, they are met with challenges from the institution. Harper (2006) states that:

Researchers have found that many black students must contend with feelings of alienation and isolation, racism and discrimination, and environmental incompatibility at PWI's. It should be noted that in 2002, 87.5 percent of all black students enrolled in

higher education attended PWI's. Among the more than 844,000 respondents to the National Survey of Student Engagement, black students were the group least satisfied with their college experiences. (p. 1)

I include the information about PWI's as most flagship institutions are represented in this category including the focus of my study, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The PWI can often be an environment very different from what many African American men have experienced before. Harper (2006) further mentions that "many of these students still report being the only (or one of few) non-white students in most of their classes on predominantly white campuses" (p. 1). Being one of only a few black men on campus can cause a student to be detached from the university when there isn't sufficient support. Fries-Britt & Turner's (2002) research on student experiences at TWI's revealed that:

Conversely, Black students at TWIs are more likely to experience a disconnection between their high aspirations and their ability to be academically integrated into their institution. Research suggests that Black students at TWIs have significantly lower levels of academic integration, are less satisfied with their university, and suffer more from such interference as discrimination and inadequate study habits than White students (p. 317).

It's important to note that these institutions need to be knowledgeable about their student demographics. As more students of color gain access and attend schools other than HBCU's, there is a need for multicultural competence among administrators. Credle's (1991) research shows that there are institutional barriers that keep their campus from being a place where African American students can persist:

The barriers can be categorized as: (a) lack of orientation toward the culture of Black students; (b) lack of awareness of the needs of Black students; (c) the inability to respond

- to the needs of Black students; (d) inappropriate academic standards for Black students;
- (e) inability to help Black students survive in the complex systems of the institution; and
- (f) negative attitudes toward Black students by faculty, staff, and administrators.

With all of these obstacles in the path of African American men, support from administrators and various units on campus are needed in order for them to be successful. There are black males who attend flagship institutions and are able to persist and attain their degree. There are also a number of theoretical models, resources, and research that shows the impact and important of being committed to serving a diverse population of students.

### *Institutional Support*

Small (2007) cited remedies for improving the retention rates of African American students including improved counseling facilities, remedial and tutorial programs and pre-college programs. He also suggested that “students with the adequate pre-college preparation are likely to persevere and graduate, even if they do so while experiencing greater duress, or with lower GPAs, or choosing different career paths than comparable white students” (p. 1271).

Considering the disadvantaged upbringing that many of these students are coming from, pre-college programs can increase persistence and attainment of African American men.

Garibaldi’s (2009) research shows that:

Much of the college enrollment growth of Black students in the 1970’s was because of federally funded summer and weekend pre-college enrichment programs such as Upward Bound, Talent Search and others. Those programs have helped to increase students' academic performance in high school and their interest in attending college. (p. 25)

Although pre-college programs show to be effective preparation for college, black men may not always know about them or be able to participate. The institution can help to bridge the gap between what they should have learned in high school and what they need to know for college.

African American males need to be given the necessary resources at flagship institutions that in order to be supported. Support is essential in the education of any student, but even more in the life of an African American male. There are far too many compounding factors that can make college seem impossible to the black male. Institutions need to be prepared for the work that it will take if they are truly vested in education of black males. LaVant (1997) shows us that when these students become participants in higher education and when “well-conceived and formalized support systems are put into place to promote achievement, black men have been successful” (p. 43).

Credle (1991) goes a step forward to create a comprehensive plan of how institutions can recruit and retain these students:

(a) to examine the basic philosophy and mission of the institution, (b) to assess the institution's ability to work with Black students, (c) to assess Black students' academic and social readiness, (d) to improve communications through campus visitations, (e) to establish rapport with Black students, (f) to help Black students work within the organizational structure, (g) to develop an ongoing mentoring program, (h) to assist Black students in career exploration, and (i) to help Black students prepare for the world of work beyond the institution.

Institutions need to be fully committed in the message they send and what they actually do on their campuses. Credle shows that it's more than just having an organization that supports students; it starts with a plan before they even arrive. From recruitment to degree attainment, there needs to be

a process by which these students aren't just expected to figure things out on their own. The institution should be willing to prepare these students when they are haven't been afforded the opportunity.

Fries (2002) notes that "effective programs are those that are able to integrate individuals into the mainstream of the academic and social life of the institution in which those programs are housed" (p. 316). Credle (1991) gives several programmatic options for helping African American men become integrated into the university. Mentoring programs and organizations for African American have been successful in helping this population receive peer support and become acclimated to campus. These organizations have been integral the success of these students and their ability to persist during their time at these institutions.

As stated before, being at a PWI where there are low numbers of African Americans, let alone African American males, it becomes important to foster relationships between the students that do exist on campus as a means of support. Many campuses how found student organizations and mentoring programs as being vital links between African American males and the campus. LaVant's (1997) research shows that:

Both Astin and Tinto agree that when students bond with and to the university and develop a close relationship with peers, faculty, and staff, they are more likely to matriculate and graduate. The literature also suggests that it is often very difficult to mainstream African American men into campus life; thus, it is more important than ever to actively involve them in a formal mentoring process (p. 45)

*Theories of Student Involvement*

Astin's (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) theory of student involvement is based on his notion that students learn by being involved on campus. He bases his theory on 5 postulates that focus on psychological and sociological concepts.

1. The investment of psychological and physical energy in "objects" of one sort or another (such as tasks, people, or activities)
2. Involvement is a continuous concept
3. Involvement has both qualitative and quantitative features
4. The amount learning and development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement
5. The educational effectiveness of any policy or practice is related to its capacity to induce student involvement (p. 53).

Astin's theory argues that the institution plays an important role in what it offers to students academically and socially. However, students need to be actively involved in these opportunities in order to reap the benefits of them.

Tinto's (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) theory of student departure focuses on concepts that begin before a student comes to college and continue and change through their time at the institution. These areas include pre-entry attributes, goals/commitments, institutional experiences, integration, and outcome (whether the student persists or departs from the institution). Tinto (LaVant, 1997) believes that "academic and social integration are determinants that influence students' decisions to persist in school or drop out" (p. 45).

Astin and Tinto's theories on involvement and student departure are important frameworks when looking at persistence and attainment. Both theories explain how interaction with the college community helps students integrate into the campus and aid in student perseverance. These

interactions happen primarily within student organizations, clubs, student unions, and other social organizations.

### *Student Organizations*

Astin and Tinto's theories come to life when students join organizations on campus. However, their theories are limited as their research is primarily based on white culture. Even so, there is still a positive impact for African American males who join organizations that they can identify with in terms of ethnicity. Guffrida (2003) explains that students join an ethnic organization for several reasons. Students felt that other African American students were more welcoming to them, understood and related to them, they could be themselves and be social in a familiar way. One student from his study remarked:

I know [in my all-Black organization] someone is not going to ask me about my hair or somebody is not going to say something they shouldn't have said that I have to break down and explain to them about da da da. Just feeling like you fit in for a moment. Like you are not looked at as the minority (p. 312).

Student organizations are a vital part of campus life, especially for African American males. These organizations can serve as important pieces of social capital that these students are missing. Once they are a part of these organizations they become connected to other students who can help them navigate campus.

Likewise, most of the other high achievers noted that older, more seasoned African American male student leaders reached out to them early in their college careers (mostly when they were 1st-year students), introduced them to involvement opportunities on



campus, and personally facilitated a connection between them and campus administrators (Harper, 2008, p. 1041).

Rodgers and Summers (2008) also state that student organization or subcultures “allow African American students to bridge the cultural distance between the African American campus community and the larger, predominantly White campus community” (p. 175).

The research shows that these organizations have a great impact on African American males. Being a member of these groups allows them to feel connected to the larger campus community and not just a minority. They have other black males that are encouraging them and helping them during their time on campus. The act of having another black male who has been able to be successful on campus reach out to a new student is important to note. This concept has been more widely known as mentoring.

### *Mentoring Programs*

LaVant’s (1997) research defines formal mentoring programs as being created to “increase enrollment and retention of minority and other students, as well as increase student satisfaction with the academic experience” (pp. 44-45). These programs can help facilitate positive and beneficial interactions between underclassmen and upperclassmen. The result of retaining black males and them being satisfied with their academic experience is an advantage to institutions.

Several successful mentoring programs and African American male organizations have been created and continue to thrive across the nation. One of the most well-known initiatives for African American students is the Meyerhoff Program at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County. The program seeks to increase faculty in engineering, medicine, the sciences, and doctorate degrees among black males. It also “identifies students early, provides appropriate role

models in a supportive environment, and exposes them to other students who are like them; there is evidence that the Meyerhoff Program enhances retention of these students (LaVant, 1997, p. 6)

Eric Abercrombie, the director of the Black Man's Think Tank at the University of Cincinnati, says that "students often fail not because of academic reasons but because they do not know how or are unable to set priorities, balance male-female relationships, or learn to sacrifice" (LaVant, 1997, p. 4). The Black Man's Think Tank is an organization that addresses issues that affect black male students. A mentoring was created out of the think tank that pairs undergraduate black males and black male professional staff.

The Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) was founded out Georgia Southwestern University and also exists at North Carolina Central University, the University of Texas at Austin, and Albany State University in Georgia. The program was created as a way to provide support and encourage student development among black males. They also offer "tutorial assistance, career planning and counseling, cultural and social activities, personal development opportunities, community service, and spiritual enrichments" (LaVant, 1997, p.5). The program creators believe that by offering these services that will increase degree attainment among African American men.

The Black Male Initiative was established at Texas Southern University. The program "promotes the values of education and provides workshops and other informative events that bring successful role models to the forefront" (LaVant, 1997, p.5). Leaders from the community acts as role models and help the students recognize their own potential.

All of these organizations show that support from faculty, positive interactions with peers, and beneficial services can help these student adjust to campus. Many of these programs, including Meyerhoff, have shown to increase retention of African American males. Having purposeful

initiatives that support these students will help them as they reach the ultimate goal of degree attainment.

### Findings

I conducted 2 interviews with African American males from the cultural group Men of Impact. They were asked a series of questions that allowed them to speak about their experience as African American males on campus and as members of a cultural student organization. Both student are juniors, lived in the same residence hall freshmen year, are from the Chicago area, and currently live off campus. Social capital, freshmen year experiences, faculty/staff connections, and determination are all consistent themes through both of their interviews.

#### *Social Capital*

Charles's mother had received a degree and had the experience of being in college. He also has a brother attending a PWI in the Midwest. His aunt was a college prep counselor and worked specifically with UIUC students. He also attended a high school where he took college preparation courses and was in an honors program. His mother was very mindful of putting him into programs to prepare him for college. Charles also noted that his particular high school was predominately white, so attending a PWI like UIUC wasn't hard in terms of transition. He describes his experience in being at UIUC:

**Charles:** My experience here hasn't been bad, all my life I've been going to schools that were predominately white, so um, I've very used to settings such as this. It hasn't been bad for me, like every other place it presents its challenges and stereotypes and racism. A lot of people come from the suburbs um a lot, so it's a lot of privilege with the people who come here, and you can certainly feel that um in terms of the classroom settings and things of that nature just um people who come from white privilege or whatever. Whatever privilege it

may be, you can feel that in the classrooms, but other than that my experience has been good.

**Christin:** You said you feel that in the classrooms, how do think that plays out?

**Charles:** Um, Just basically in terms of the way people respond to questions, the way people refer to things. I'm in advertising so a lot of times I'll hear people, I think the other day they were talking, we were talking about Gatorade and someone said, yeah I think they're repositioning themselves to be to cater more to an urban market and yada yada yada, and I wanted to say like what's an urban market? What does that mean? Cause what they're doing has nothing to do with catering to an urban market. They were changing their drink and changing the logo and it was nothing about an urban market. So, I mean you see ignorance everywhere and a lot of times I don't, I don't speak up on it probably as much as I should, but, you know it's a battle you don't always want to fight sometimes.

Charles seemed to have a good understanding of what he would encounter on campus and wasn't really bothered with what he encountered. The social capital he already possessed most likely helped him come to the conclusions he had about privilege and ignorance.

Anthony didn't attend any college preparation programs but said that he took an Advanced Placement (AP) course in math and was an honors student. He didn't believe that his high school prepared him adequately for college. He believed that his teachers didn't care and was discouraged by his high school counselor to apply to UIUC. He was encouraged to apply at less selective Illinois institutions that was, in his opinion, due to his ACT scores.

As stated before, several similarities existed between both students; however, social capital seemed to be the biggest difference. While Charles had a great amount of capital, Anthony had little to none to prepare him for an institution like UIUC. It became obvious throughout both interviews

that their pre-college experiences made an impact on how they were able to adjust (or not) to college. It also showed that this capital eased the transition into collegiate life at a PWI.

### *1<sup>st</sup> Semester experiences*

When Anthony arrived on campus he was overwhelmed by the UIUC culture. He described his first encounter with campus in his first semester:

"When I first got here, that's when they were having that problem with those parties (theme parties). When I first got it here, that being my first time on this campus for it being predominately white, that was kind of like, it wasn't like a shock, I knew stuff like that happened in the world, but the fact that it was happening on a school campus, was kind of you know a shock. My first class that I ever had, my first lecture class, it was a math class, it was overwhelming, that it was all these white faces, it wasn't really that many black faces."

Charles and Anthony both had similar experiences during their first semester on campus. They both described this time as being the hardest and most challenging in terms of academics. Anthony described his struggles during his 1<sup>st</sup> semester on campus:

With my type of studying skills, I wasn't doing anything. That was the worst academic experience of my life. I was traumatized after that semester. I didn't know what I was going to do. I got on academic probation. I've never been, ever, been in school close to being on academic probation in my life. I never had as bad grades as I had at that time and I feel like because of my studying skills and you know the stuff the habits I had picked up in high school and the fact that I didn't work on those skills that the reason why I had such a terrible semester, plus the fact that I had all that freedom.

His academic advisor was also not encouraging about his ability to get into the college of engineering and ended up being placed in general studies. Anthony noted that his friends had similar situations with their academic advisors.

Charles had a different experience with his academic advisor. His advisor was encouraging to him and provided support. His advisor was able to help him determine a backup plan if he wasn't accepted in the college of media as an advertising major (he was accepted eventually). It was interesting that both of them felt the first semester was hard, even for Charles who had more knowledge of what to expect in college.

#### *Faculty/Staff Connections*

Anthony only noted that his graduate advisor from OMSA was the most prominent staff member that he interacts with. This particular staff member was a young white woman that he believed cared about him and wanted him to succeed. I think this is interesting to highlight as African American are not the only people that can be a source of support to African American males. Having a genuine desire to encourage students can go a long way with them.

Charles interacts frequently with faculty in the advertising department and with the dean of the college of media (who is African American). Charles remarked that "There are a few other people in the advertising department that I keep a close relationship with for recommendations and mentoring and things of that nature."

#### *Men of Impact and other campus organizations*

As members of Men of Impact Charles and Anthony both mentioned that they interacted with the advisors (an African American male and female) of the group often. They attend the weekly meetings and plan programs with the guidance of their advisors. Charles was initially asked to attend a meeting by a friend who already a part of the group. He has been involved with

the group for 2 years. Charles speaks very positively about Men of Impact and the effect its had on him:

Men of impact has been good for me, it's also been good because it's composed of most of my friends, so a lot of my closest friends are in men of impact. So it's definitely something that has kept us structured, kept us focused, and um given us exposure to things beyond college. Like when we go on our retreat and things like that, so and uh just the different workshops we may have attended and things like that. It's prepared us for life after college and also kept us together while we were here

Anthony was recruited by a current member of Men of Impact and has been involved with the group since the fall of 2009. He also had similar feelings about his experience with Men of Impact like Charles:

It's been positive because it gets me involved. My freshmen year I was not involved at all because I was just trying to find my, my role as far as academics, so I was always uh in the library doing work, so I didn't really have time to do any extracurricular stuff. But I think it's positive because it gives me something outside of the classroom to be responsible for.

They both recognize the role that Men of impact has played in their lives and that it has helped them do more outside of the classroom. They've been able to be a part of an organization that has helped them stay connected to other African American males. I believe this connection has proven to be a great source of support as they surround themselves with other academically focused students.

They both agreed that there were many resources on campus that have been useful to students on campus but not necessarily to them. OMSA, CORE, the Bruce D. Nesbitt Cultural Center, 100 Strong, and CBSU were among the many campus organizations they believed to be

beneficial. However, they noted that these organizations (with the exception of OMSA) haven't been as useful as Men of Impact.

Charles also spoke about his connections to other groups on campus that have helped him to prepare for his future career:

I was a part of NAACP my first year here and now I'm a part of the American Advertising Federation (AAF), but men of impact didn't really expose me to either of those. I really just, NAACP was just, living in FAR (Florida Avenue Residence Hall) a lot of people were already in it and they told me about and I checked out a few meetings. AAF was just something that people I met through advertising they had told me I should be part of it.

That it would help me get jobs and things like that, so it was not really men of impact, it was my social network that exposed me to those groups

Overall, they seemed to have enjoyed their involvement in Men of impact, other campus groups and the effect it's had on their educational experience. They have taken advantage of the variety of resources on campus to their benefit.

### *Determination*

What became most evident with Charles and Anthony was how focused and determined they were. They seemed to be focused from the very beginning, much more than their peers.

Charles stated that he maintains friendships with others that are focused and goal oriented like himself. He has had friends that have dropped out because school "wasn't for them", had financial issues, or let their social life take priority. Anthony stated similar reasons for his friends leaving school and that they became too focused on having the stereotypical college experience.

Anthony stated that "The reason why I picked U of I, I figured the name that the U of I, the reputation that it carried, when I graduated, it would take me much further than if I were to



graduate from Howard (an HBCU)." He was focused on receiving a quality education to advance his future career. Both students desire to either get advanced degrees or begin working in their fields post-graduation. Although, they have friends that are not as driven as they are, they make the choice to stay on the path to be successful in their academics.

### **Discussion**

There are several points to highlight from my study that show which factors can be involved in increasing degree attainment for African American men. Social capital is important in the life of African American students as it gives them the necessary tools to advance in college and in their future career. In the life of Charles it prepared him for his experience at UIUC when he received guidance from his family. The first semester experience of both students was also important in how they were introduced to campus. Despite how challenging their coursework was, having few African American peers in classes, and being in the midst of the theme party controversy, they still stayed at UIUC. I think that their support network (family, friends, faculty, student organizations) along with their own personal determination has kept them at this institution. I believe the encouragement they received was vital to their success as students; no matter the form it was received.

### *Limitations of theories and research*

Astin and Tinto's theory, along with most student development theories, are very broad and based on dominant culture. The use of these theories can provide a foundation for how we look at persistence and attainment. However, they can't really be used for specific research on the African American male college experience. There also seems to be a lack of research on Greek organizations and their impact on students of color. I hypothesize that these organizations can often have a negative connotation with relation to a formal mentoring program or institution

sponsored student organization. However, Greek life can be positive as it is a way of being involved on campus and bonding with the institution. The research in general can also focus on African American students or women in general and not just black males.

. My research can't be used to make generalizations about all African American men as it only applies to Charles and Anthony's specific experiences. I also chose 2 students who were not randomly chosen but came recommended from one of the advisors of Men of Impact. For the most part, Charles and Anthony had positive experiences, but what about the student who haven't? Or the students who have dropped out, what was their level of involvement on campus? Maybe they were just as involved, but couldn't handle the academic workload on campus. There are a number of questions to be asked of the African American males and how they interact with the campus. It would have also been interesting to interview students from a variety of organizations with different experiences to have more well-rounded research.

### **Conclusion**

I believe there are a combination of resources and support that add to the overall goal of attaining a degree for an African American male at a flagship. While cultural student organizations help, the addition of faculty, staff, social capital, and determination play a role. Both of the students I interviewed had challenging semesters, but what kept them from quitting were the items I just mentioned. African American males need specific initiatives that support them and allow them to become successful during their time on campus. They all helped to keep them focused on their ultimate goal of attaining a degree. I think this is best stated by Charles and the advice he gave to other African American males entering UIUC:

Definitely stay focused, it's a lot about the relationships you build here will determine your success. If you surround yourself with people who are on the same goal and same mindset

of being successful or being successful on campus at least, you will do well. Just keep pushing yourself to do better or whatever, that's definitely good. And feel like you belong so to speak, not entitlement or anything like that but just know you belong here and that you are smart enough and you are capable as anybody else here. Don't feel inferior to anyone else on this campus, uh be it race, creed, color or any of that, don't feel inferior. And uh reach out when you need help, don't be afraid to ask for help, people are willing to help, I have noticed that, people are willing to help.

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Appendix A: Questions for EOL 574 Interviews

- Are you a transfer, if so, why did you transfer to UIUC?
- Why did you decide to attend UIUC?
- What has been your experience as an African American male on campus?
- What has been the experience of your peers/friends on campus?
- What have been some of your obstacles?
- How were you able to adjust to the academic standards of UIUC?
- Do you believe high school adequately prepared you for UIUC? Why or why not?
- Did you participate in a summer/college preparation programs prior to UIUC?
- Have you had any issues with academics since you've been a student here?
- How has men of impact helped you as a student and student of color?
- What are the resources on campus you've taken advantage of besides MOI?
- Do you interact with faculty/staff on campus?
- What are the most helpful resources on campus besides MOI?
- Are there outside/off campus resources that you use?
- Any advice/tips you would give to undergraduate men of color at PWI's (especially those that are incoming freshmen)?